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ABSTRACT

The oral interview (OI) was developed to meet the need for a testing procedure of second language speaking skills. It has been refined and expanded several times since first developed in the 1950's for use by the U.S. Government. Now known as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/Educational Testing Services (ACTFL/ETS) scale, or "academic scale," the oral interview assessment method has demonstrated a high degree of validity and reliability as a testing method. It has been used in training workshops for oral proficiency testing of high school and postsecondary second language students since 1981. There are eleven specified ranges of proficiency in functional language use, from 0 (no practical ability to function in the language) to 5 (ability equivalent to well-educated native speakers). A list of resources for tester training workshops and references are provided. (JW)

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TESTING SPEAKING PROFICIENCY: THE ORAL INTERVIEW. Q&A.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Testing Speaking Proficiency: The Oral Interview

Prepared by Pardee Lowe, Jr. and Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro

America is confronted by a paradox: teaching students to speak a second language has been a goal of the second language teaching profession for over three decades; yet, as a nation, we are falling further and further behind in our ability to speak languages other than English for such important purposes as trade, travel, and diplomacy. Although three of the four language skills—listening, reading, and writing—appear to be taught and tested in the second language classroom to the satisfaction of teachers and students, such is not the case with speaking. While much excellent teaching may be taking place, there is a substantial need for a readily available and effective means to measure second language speaking proficiency with the same degree of accuracy and validity that is possible for the other skill areas. The oral proficiency interview described below may provide such a means.

What Is the Oral Interview?

The oral interview (OI) is a testing procedure capable of measuring a wide range of speaking abilities from novice to native. In the OI, the student converses with one or two trained testers, on a variety of topics, for approximately 10 to 40 minutes depending on the student's proficiency level. The resulting speech sample (which may be tape recorded for later verification) is then rated on a scale ranging from 0 (no practical ability to function in the language) to 5 (ability equivalent to that of a well-educated native speaker). "Plus" ratings (0+, 1+, 2+, up to 4+) are given to students who substantially surpass the requirements for a given level but fail to sustain performance at the next higher level. The resulting scale contains, in total, 11 ranges of overall proficiency, with each range defined in terms of functional language use. For example, the level 2 definition reads:

> "Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations including introductions and casual conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information; can handle limited work requirements, needing help in handling any complications or difficulties. Can get the gist of most conversations on nontechnical subjects, i.e., topics which require no specialized knowledge. Can give directions for one place to another. Has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to respond simply with some circumlocutions; accent, though often quite faulty, is intelligible; can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar."

The above definition, like those for the other levels, illustrates the extent to which the oral interview is based on real-life linguistic needs and behaviors. While these definitions were originally designed to meet the needs for assessing fluency at

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the functional levels required for government service abroad (see following section), they have recently been "expanded" at the lower levels in order to encompass learning goals that can realistically be attained in secondary school and college programs. These definitions also underscore that the interview is a proficiency test, which compares the student's speaking ability to that of an educated native speaker using the language for real-life communication purposes, as contrasted to an achievement test, which is based on the material covered in a particular course of study.

How Was It Developed?

In the 1950s, the U.S. Department of State identified the need to verify the foreign language skills of its employees. A needs analysis of State Department jobs at home and abroad was carried out by the Foreign Service Institute, and a series of statements of oral language proficiency was developed, as well as a procedure for conducting a face-to-face interview to elicit an appropriate sample of the candidate's speech. The interviewing and rating system was officially adopted, and prospective and current government employees have been tested for oral proficiency since that time, not only by the Foreign Service Institute, but also by other federal agencies concerned with second language training and use. The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), a consortium of government agencies involved in the teaching and testing of language proficiency, has continued to refine and expand the proficiency definitions and to provide even better guidelines for conducting the interview.

In the late 1960s, the Peace Corps turned to Educational Testing Service (ETS) for help in developing a program to test the oral proficiency of its trainees and volunteers. ETS' role became one of training testers at a number of in-country Peace Corps sites. In the early 1970s, the possibility of wider applications of the oral interview procedure came from bilingual education programs and agencies at the municipal and state levels. ETS trained interviewers and raters for bilingual and ESL teacher certification programs in a number of states and, in some places, also developed and operated testing programs.

In the last decade, the proficiency scale and the interview have attracted increasing interest within academic circles. Second language teachers at the high school and postsecondary levels realized that the scale would need some adjustment to adequately measure their students' proficiency. The lower end of the scale (0, 0+, 1, 1+) was not sensitive enough to register observable differences in proficiency among students, and the upper end of the scale would seldom be appropriate for the skill levels their students could reasonably be expected to achieve. The federally funded "Common Yardstick Project" at ETS addressed this issue by developing additional descriptions of oral proficiency between levels 0 and 1 and between levels 1 and 2. This expanded scale was subsequently refined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the ILR under a Department of Education grant. Known as the ACTFL/ETS scale or the "academic scale," it is currently taught at all ACTFL and ETS workshops for individuals interested in the oral testing of high school and postsecondary second language students.

How Does the OI Rate as a Test?

The OI has demonstrated a high degree of reliability and validity. It is reliable in that trained raters who independently rate the same live or taped interview normally assign the same rating or differ by only a "plus" point. The OI is a face-valid test of speaking ability in that it requires candidates to speak in a realistic conversational setting. The content validity of the OI is maintained from interview to interview by having trained interviewers always test for the functions, content, and accuracy that characterize each level.

Practicality is a crucial issue in all testing. Paper-and-pencil tests are highly practical because they can be given to large numbers of students simultaneously and can be scored by a nonspecialist. Unfortunately, they cannot directly measure speaking proficiency. By contrast, the OI requires one or more trained interviewers

and is both more labor-intensive and more time-consuming than paper-and-pencil tests. However, the importance of oral competence fully justifies the time and effort required to test it.

How Can the OI Be Used?

The OI should be employed in those situations where proficiency testing is in order, e.g., placement testing; testing prior to and after intensive language training; testing prior to and after living abroad; testing at the end of a major sequence of high school or college courses; testing for course credits awarded for proven proficiency rather than for number of credit hours taken; testing for suitable language ability for teacher certification for high school teachers and graduate teaching assistants.

How Does One Receive Training in Oral Proficiency Assessment?

Since 1981, ACTFL and ETS have been conducting training workshops in oral proficiency testing for high school and postsecondary second language teachers. The workshops run the gamut from relatively short familiarization sessions to four- or five-day formal training workshops.

Lasting two hours to two days, the familiarization workshops introduce teachers to the concepts and procedures involved in oral proficiency assessment. The ACTFL/ETS scale is presented and, depending on the length of the session, teachers listen to and rate taped interviews and may also have the opportunity to conduct practice interviews. Two-day familiarization workshops are offered at ETS several times each year through the Division of Educational Services. ACTFL and ETS can offer similar workshops at the sites of sponsoring agencies or institutions, and these workshops can be tailored to meet the particular needs of the audience. See "Resources" for further information.

Formal tester training workshops, which last from four to five days, are being offered in 1982-83 by ACTFL and ETS under the sponsorship of the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The ILR, through the Defense Language Institute/Language School Oral Interview Transfer Project, also provided advanced training to some foreign language instructors at a two-week workshop in August 1982. ILR hopes to be able to continue including representatives of the academic sector with research interests in their oral proficiency testers' training program on a space-available basis. For further information, see "Resources."

RESOURCES

The following individuals may be contacted for further information on:
A = information on and copies of proficiency level descriptions
B = familiarization workshops on interview scale and interviewing procedure
C = formal tester-training workshops
D = advanced tester-training/research oriented workshops

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Note: The references below provide general information on the oral proficiency interview, but do not substitute for the hands-on training required to administer and rate interviews in a valid and reliable manner.

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